

# Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri: Profile of a Jihadist Leader

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## Introduction

Mustafa Sethmariam Nasar, better known by his pen names Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri and Umar Abd al-Hakim, has been mentioned in connection with a number of terrorist incidents over the past few years, including the London attacks in July 2005, the Madrid train bombings in March 2004, and even the 9/11 conspiracy. al-Suri is reported to have planted sleeper cells in Europe and has been portrayed as an “operational chief” for al-Qaida in Europe. [SLIDE 2]

I argue in this paper that al-Suri has been and still is important, despite his arrest last year, not because he may or may not have served in the capacity of a terrorist mastermind, but because during the past 25 years he has been an important trainer, supervisor, teacher, ideologue, and journalist in the service of various jihadi groups. Most importantly, his writings have become a key part of al-Qaida’s growing body of ‘strategic studies’. al-Suri has formulated theories and concepts that will remain an important legacy for the next generation of jihadis. In the following, I will present his biography and some glimpses from his writings.

15 minutes is very little, and I will have to skip most of the biographical data, but you will find my paper on al-Suri posted on our website, [www.ffi.no/TERRA/publications](http://www.ffi.no/TERRA/publications) and on CDs containing FFI’s publications on jihadism, which we have made available at this conference.

## al-Suri’s Biography

al-Suri was born in Aleppo, Syria, in October 1958. His real name is Mustafa bin ‘Abd al-Qadir Sitt Maryam Nasar, but he is mostly known by his pen names, Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri and Umar ‘Abd al-Hakim. [SLIDE 3] His path to jihadi activism began at the University of Aleppo at the end of the 1970s, when Syria was rocked by an escalating confrontation between the Bathist regime and the Muslim Brotherhood opposition. al-Suri says he experienced a religious awakening around 1980, and through friends, he joined a radical Muslim Brotherhood faction called the Combatant Vanguard Organisation. His cell was uncovered shortly after al-Suri joined, and he was forced to flee to Jordan.

In Amman, he joined the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood organisation, and received extensive military training in Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. He specialised in explosive engineering and guerrilla warfare techniques. A gifted student, he excelled in these skills. However, the Islamist uprising in Syria failed, and the negative lessons learned from the Syrian Islamist uprising became a key theme in his later writings.

After a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1982 he moved to France, before settling in Spain in 1985. He remained involved with the Syrian opposition and started working on his first study, known as “The jihadist revolution in Syria”, later published in Peshawar, in mid-1991.

al-Suri went to Afghanistan in 1987 and under the influence of Abdallah Azzam he abandoned the Syrian struggle for the international jihad. He worked as a military instructor and in 1991 he also released the draft of his masterpiece, “The Call for a Global Islamic Resistance”.

During the period 1992-1997, al-Suri lived mostly in Spain and then in London. He was instrumental in setting up the well-known al-Qaida cell led by Abu Dahdah in Spain and he became a prominent jihadi journalist, working with the media unit of the Algerian GIA organisation in London

In 1997 he went back to Afghanistan where he served in various capacities, as military instructor, writer, strategist, and jihadi lecturer. In Kabul, al-Suri supervised the training of jihadi recruits at the al-Ghuraba camp and at the large Darunta training complex near Jalalabad. He reportedly worked with Abu Khabab al-Masri, al-Qaida’s non-conventional weapons expert, and they allegedly developed training manuals for crude CB-weapons. However, al-Suri’s main preoccupation was not exotic weapons, but lectures in guerrilla warfare techniques and jihadi strategies, as well as jihadi media.

He paid homage to Mullah Omar, the Taleban’s supreme leader, and he worked for the Taleban government in several capacities. As for the al-Qaida leadership, al-Suri had a turbulent relationship with Usama bin Ladin. In fact, before 9/11, al-Suri was portrayed as leader of a secessionist faction within al-Qaida. An outspoken fearless critic, al-Suri did not hesitate to criticise bin Ladin. al-Suri presented himself as an independent ‘writer, researcher, thinker, and theorizer’ who did not ‘enjoy any party or organisational capacity’. But a recently declassified document shows that he sat on an al-Qaida–Taleban liaison committee together with Zarqawi, Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi, Ibn Shaykh al-Libi, and others.

Little is known about his whereabouts after 9/11. He is believed to have been on the run in Iran, Iraq and Pakistan between 2001 and 2005. In 2004, he claimed to have spent three years in solitude, devoting himself entirely to his intellectual work on the jihadi movement. He completed his masterpiece “The Global Islamic Resistance Call”, which was released at the end of 2004.

During these years, al-Suri appears to have continued to maintain contacts with key al-Qaida figures, including Abu Layth al-Libi and Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi. Media reports suggest that he visited the camp for foreign mujahidin in the Ansar al-Islam enclave in Northern Iraq. It is also alleged that he visited Spain and the UK. In November 2004, the US Administration announced a US\$5 million reward for his capture or death. This prompted al-Suri to issue a long statement in which he vowed to resume his operational activities. In his last communiqué in August 2005, al-Suri called for new attacks on European, and especially French, targets. In late October 2005, al-Suri was reportedly captured by Pakistani forces in Quetta and later handed over to the United States.

## Glimpses from al-Suri's strategic literature

[SLIDE 4] al-Suri's legacy is his contribution to al-Qaida's library of strategic studies. This genre is not devoted to exploring what is permitted (*halal*) and forbidden (*haram*). Instead, these studies are "individual judgements based on the lessons from experience, from the matters of opinion, war and smart action".<sup>1</sup>

The "Call for a Global Islamic Resistance" is al-Suri's masterpiece, a huge book of 1,600 pages, which has received wide coverage on jihadi websites. After its publication, al-Suri has been hailed as "the greatest jihadi theoretician in our time!" [SLIDE 5] The book offers an historical overview of past and contemporary jihadi movements with an emphasis on experiences, mistakes and lessons learned. This is followed by a collection of detailed practical theories for how the jihadi movement should operate effectively in the post 9/11 era.

It is characterised by a rational, semi-secular, and pseudo-scientific approach. It is also very self-critical, and differs significantly from the conspiratorial, defensive and sometimes hard-to-access theological rhetoric offered by many salafi-jihadi ideologues. [SLIDE 6]

Its strongest aspect is perhaps its clear recognition of the drastically changed balance of power between the Crusader Alliance and their Muslim collaborators on the one side, and the global jihadist movement on the other. It emphasises especially the overwhelming US dominance of airspace. al-Suri himself had already noticed this during the shelling of al-Qaida camps in 1998, when US cruise missiles hit one building each, shattering the myth that Afghanistan's distant and rugged mountains provided solid protection. al-Suri concluded that in the post 9/11 era, territorial consolidation and guerrilla warfare from fixed bases in rugged terrain is impossible. A new Afghanistan is unimaginable, at least in the short term. Instead, the future jihadist war must be led by small decentralised, mobile units operating completely independently of any centralised organisation. [SLIDE 7]

In al-Suri's thinking, there are basically three types of jihadist warfare<sup>2</sup>:

- The *Tanzims*, which are local or regional hierarchical secret organisations. Examples of such groups in contemporary history are plentiful: Egyptian Islamic Jihad, The Combatant Vanguard Organisation in Syria, The Shabiba-movement in Morocco, the Asbat al-Ansar group in Lebanon, etc.
- "Open Fronts", which are essentially large-scale insurgencies against an occupying or imperial power. The most prominent examples are Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, etc.
- "The Jihad of Individual Terrorism", which are sporadic acts of terrorism carried out by small, autonomous cells or individuals, unconnected to organised formations. Examples are Ramzi Yusuf, the mastermind of the first World Trade Center bombings in New York in 1993 and Sayyid Nusayr, the assassin of the Jewish rightwing Rabbi Meir Kahane in 1990.

<sup>1</sup> *Da'wat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah al-'Alamiyyah*, p.1355.

<sup>2</sup> The following section refers primarily to Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, *Da'wat al-muqawamah al-islamiyyah al-'alamiyyah*, chapter 8, subsections 4, and 5.

al-Suri's argument is that the *tanzims*, the traditional secret organisations so typical for jihadist activities in the past, have outlived their relevance. Their dependency on sanctuaries in friendly states can no longer be counted upon in a uni-polar world order and the increasing international cooperation against terrorism. Furthermore, their hierarchical structure means that if one member is caught, the whole organisation is at peril. Finally, the progressive Western occupation and usurpation of Muslim land (Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.) obligates a reorientation. The current war must be aimed at "repelling the invading intruders and assailants" from Muslim lands. One has to postpone the traditional goal of an Islamic revolution in one country or one geographical area.

al-Suri therefore recommends that future jihadi warfare should be concentrated around the open fronts wherever such fronts are possible. Given the difficulty of opening such fronts, "the jihad of individual terrorism" becomes, in reality, the only option for most jihadis. [SLIDE 8]

The emphasis on "individual terrorism" is a common theme in al-Suri's most recent writings. al-Suri's slogan is: *nizam, la tanzim*, 'System, not organisation'. In other words, there should be 'an operative system' or template, available anywhere for anybody, wishing to participate in the global jihad either on his own or with a small group of trusted associates, and there should not exist any 'organisation for operations'. Hence, the global jihadist movement should discourage any direct organisational bonds between the leadership and the operative units. Leadership should only be exercised through 'general guidance' and the operative leaders should exist only at the level of small cells. The glue in this highly decentralised movement is nothing else than 'a common aim, a common doctrinal program and a comprehensive (self-) educational program'.

The same goal of decentralisation is applied to financing and training. All cells should be self-sustained financially, with the possible exception of start-up money from jihadi activists termed 'cell builders'. The latter category includes skilled jihadis whose primary task is to create new independent cells, without connecting them to any organisational structure. The 'cell builder' is an Achilles heel in the system, and various precautions are taken to minimize the risk associated with his role. He is supposed to disappear from the scene before any operative activity commences, either by going to another country, going completely underground, or participating in a martyrdom operation.

The concept of individualised terrorism is developed in tandem with the benefits accruing from participation at the various 'open fronts' which serve not only as recruitment tools on their own, but also provide valuable training grounds for members of future independent cells. The individualised terrorism concept also relies on a total de-territorialisation of jihadist warfare, in which the importance of geographical distance is minimised. The aim of resisting the occupation should be applied through 'striking against it in every place', not simply within the confines of the traditional theatre of war. The entire globe has become the theatre of war. Hence, al-Suri appeals to his audience, especially his European- and US-based recruits, to begin the jihad at home, and he defines a long list of legitimate targets of attacks to be found in most Western or Arab cities. Despite the wide definition of legitimate

targets, al-Suri strongly cautions against operations in which many ordinary Muslims, or non-hostile non-Muslims, are killed. Such attacks will play into the hands of the Crusaders, and undermine efforts at mobilising the Islamic nation behind the jihadi call. His slogan is: “The resistance is the Islamic nation’s battle and not a struggle of an elite”, a clear antithesis to the avant-garde thinking of previous jihadi organisations, who gave top priority to capturing power in one country. [SLIDE 9]

### **Concluding Remarks**

This brief biography and these glimpses from Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri’s writings show that the global jihadist movement has amassed tremendous experience and insights from the numerous scenes of jihadi warfare over the past decades, which are now being translated into a lessons-learned oriented literature. Writers such as al-Suri also represent a very important strain in contemporary jihadism, where there is a significant willingness to admit mistakes, learn from the past and rationally assess strengths and weaknesses in order to rebuild the jihadist movement on a new basis. This ‘jihadi strategic studies’ literature will become critical in months and years ahead, when the remaining ‘classic al-Qaida’ leaders are killed, arrested, or detained incommunicado. A decisive element in the future of jihadist terrorism is the degree to which skills, experience and insight from the old guard are being transferred to a younger generation of jihadis who have never been to Afghanistan and never met bin Ladin. al-Suri has, unfortunately, contributed greatly to this transfer, and has formulated concepts and ideas with appeal to the more intellectually minded al-Qaida sympathisers. Through his scientific and rational approach to jihadist warfare, his writings have the potential of attracting new segments into the al-Qaida orbit.

Thank you for your attention!